

Revolutionary Persuasion: Thomas Paine's Influential Rhetoric in *Common Sense*

On January 10, 1776, an unknown English immigrant drastically altered the course of human events by publishing what has been referred to as the most influential pamphlet in American history. This man was Thomas Paine, and his pamphlet was titled *Common Sense* - two words which to this very day resonate as synonymous with American independence and freedom. Paine's influential writing in *Common Sense* made an immediate impact on the minds and hearts of thousands of colonists throughout the densely populated eastern seaboard of North America, calling for an end to tyrannical British rule and for the subsequent foundation of an independent, egalitarian republic. Paine's "hardnosed political logic demanded the creation of an American nation" (Rhetoric, np), and through his persuasive discourse he achieved just that. Paine's knowledge and use of rhetorical skill was a main reason for the groundbreaking, widespread success of *Common Sense*, the magnitude of which, many would argue, has yet to be matched. Rhetoric is the art or science of persuasion and the ability to use language effectively. This paper will provide an in-depth analysis of Paine's rhetoric in *Common Sense* by examining factors such as the historical time period, communicator attributes, and audience psychology, and will deliver a thorough application of contemporary modes of persuasive study to the document's core ideological messages. To Paine, the cause of America was the cause of all mankind (Paine, 3), and for that matter he will be forever known as the father of the American Revolution.

By the year 1776, tension between the American colonies and their British ruler was at a peak. Taxation without representation had fueled such rebellious acts as the Boston Tea Party,

which prompted British parliament to pass the “Intolerable Acts.” It was becoming increasingly clear to the colonists that action had to be taken against such oppression, so each colony began its own small congressional body and many called their citizens to arms (Common, np). By the time *Common Sense* was published, small-scale warfare had been occurring for roughly nine months, with the battles of Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill being the most prominent. The question of independence was being strongly considered, though it was not altogether the sentiment of the majority at the time. The rebellious colonists, consumed by feelings of fear, anger, and betrayal (Ferguson, 472), understood that now was the time to act on the idea of separation; but they were still in need of some justification - something that would give them a reason for the war they were already fighting. That justification arrived in the form of *Common Sense*, in which Paine writes “The time hath found us”, and, “Courage hath not yet forsaken us... Why is it that we hesitate?” (Paine, 35). In his writing, Paine stressed the important role of the present moment, and encouraged that the colonists not delay in their pursuit for independence. Of the approximately 2.5 million individuals inhabiting the American colonies in 1776, it seemed that many were on the verge of all-out revolution, and *Common Sense* served to tip the scales.

After living the majority of his young adult life pursuing various trades in England, Thomas Paine arrived in the American colonies in late 1774 via the helping hand of Benjamin Franklin, who saw promising intellect in the eager Paine. Soon after Paine had assimilated to life in the colonies, he obtained the occupation of journalist for the Pennsylvania Magazine. Shortly thereafter, he became highly interested and involved in the political situations of the times, and garnished a local reputation as an able, well-spoken, and knowledgeable writer. He was a pamphleteer in the opportune “age of pamphleteering”, and was able to perpetually transform

political language as a result. Paine's ability as a captivating communicator "...helped to explain how the widest range of readers could be pulled into Paine's orbit, and identifies the birth of a distinctively American voice in politics" (Ferguson, 469). Tom Paine's personality and experiences also go a long way when attempting to dissect his emotional and thought-provoking mechanisms in *Common Sense*. Growing up, Paine was disillusioned by the concept of monarchical governance and aristocracy, and some cite that this hostility toward hereditary structures may be a result of the dysfunctional relationship he had with his father. Quickly made apparent in *Common Sense* is the idea that "Paine was a person who delighted in the destruction of tyrants" (Jordan, 304). As a person, Tom Paine maintained a sincere disposition; he was a man of integrity, creativity, courage, charisma, and passion. These communicator attributes allowed him to gain much credibility and fame through his writing, though this rise to prominence came with time. The first edition of *Common Sense* was published anonymously, which displayed Paine's humility in that he strove for the dissemination of the truth, not the acquisition of authority or social attractiveness. Paine's wide array of experiences gave him many comparative frames of reference and the ability to understand current events on many different levels of thought (Ferguson, 477). Ultimately, Paine was a common man who could relate to the plight of the King's restless subjects. He not only spoke their language, but conveyed their sentiments in a persuasively bold style.

One key element evident in Paine's writing is that he understood the psychology of his audience, which is essential to the art of persuasion. Paine was an author who knew many things about his various audiences (Ferguson, 471), and certainly used this to his advantage when structuring his profound arguments in *Common Sense*. The pamphlet is written to "The Inhabitants of America", which consisted of a wide variety of people across numerous

backgrounds, ethnicities, backgrounds, beliefs, and intellect. Paine's ability to connect with such a diverse populace is truly remarkable; his ability to unite them toward a common cause even more amazing. In its simplest terms, *Common Sense* was written by a common man for the common man. At this point in American history, there were three basic types of people which made up the bulk of Paine's audience: Patriots, Loyalists, and the conservatives, or those who were still on the fence about the idea of independence. The Patriots were, of course, those who were widely in favor of revolution; they were ready for an immediate change, hungry for independence, and were rapidly gaining in number. These colonists "were surely ready for a plea for separation" (Jordan, 299), and Paine provided just that, effectively reinforcing their attitudes and inspiring a greater urgency for the cause of independence. The Loyalists, or "Tories" as many an infuriated Patriot referred to them as, made up those members of the population who were still loyal to the throne of England. They held strong attitudes on this position, and were not easily swayed – to them, the King was the only authority, and their plan of action was that the American colonies must pursue reconciliation. Paine saw them in need of much convincing, as he strongly and ferociously questioned and attacked these absurd claims of reconciliation by countering Loyalist assertions with evidence to the contrary. The conservative folk were those who were considering the idea of independence but would rather submit their complacency to the King than jump on board the vessel of revolution (Morgan, 74). Paine approached their position of cognitive dissonance, or inconsistency of thought, with appeals to their guilt of conscience and fear of imminent danger (which will be analyzed more thoroughly in the latter sections of this paper) in order to "light a fire" under them, so to speak, and engage them in a transformative state of mind, inspiring revolutionary sentiments in support of a cause greater than oneself. With this knowledge of his target audiences' psychological factors, Paine was able to gain the trust of

his fellow colonists, which required a big leap of faith by many who knew that their freedom, and perhaps their very livelihood, was on the line. “We are already greater than the King wishes us to be...” says Paine (25). To Paine, this sort of inspiration and encouragement was crucial to unifying the people toward independence, and this assertion clearly demonstrates the faith that Paine had in his colonial audience, for without their support, *Common Sense* would not have been nearly as influential.

An evaluation of the ideological proclamations, goals, aims, and sentiments contained within the message of *Common Sense* is first necessary before attempting to carry out a full rhetorical analysis of Paine’s discourse. Thomas Paine drafted and published *Common Sense* within thirteen months of his arrival in the New World, and within three months of its publication, his popular pamphlet had sold nearly 120,000 copies throughout the North American seaboard. In today’s terms, that would be the equivalent of roughly ten million copies (Jordan, 296). The popularity of Paine’s work stemmed not only from its content, but from the many methods of dissemination it encountered; the high rate of colonial literacy was key, and “Colonists read it aloud in a wide variety of settings” (Rhetoric, np). George Washington even had it distributed and read to his soldiers to boost morale. The main purpose of *Common Sense* was to inspire American independence from British rule, but in order to achieve this goal Paine had to draw upon many ideological sentiments and weighty arguments, and he had to back his claims with much evidence. *Common Sense* is split into four main sections. The first is titled “Of the Origin and Design of Government in General, With Concise Remarks on the English Constitution.” The second section is titled “Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession.” In these first two sections, Paine builds a strong foundation for American independence by providing the reader with logical reasons for the unjust, irrational, and evil tendencies of monarchical

government. "Society in every state is a blessing, but government a necessary evil", Paine states (4). The result of Paine's inquiry as to monarchy was to show that the only basis for hereditary succession was usurpation (Morgan, 73). Through his writing, Paine effectively makes the King the enemy of the people, as if it had always been that way. By providing evidence of monarchical wrongdoings through a tedious review of history and a multitude of comparative references, he establishes that monarchy as a form of government is illegitimate to the American way. An argument made very prevalent in *Common Sense* is the idea of natural rights; that a monarchical government clearly goes against the laws of nature while independence and democracy uphold these laws. Paine makes this very clear when he says such things as, "Everything that is right or natural pleads for separation" (21) and, "A government of our own is our natural right" (29).

In the remaining sections of *Common Sense* titled, "Thoughts of the Present State of American Affairs" and "Of the Present ability of America, with Some Miscellaneous Reflections", Paine transfers the power of government from monarchy to the people, and calls for unity among the American colonists while strengthening his plea for separation. "The King is dead;" says author Winthrop D. Jordan of Paine's effectiveness, "His power is in the people" (298). In his approach to these sections, and the entire work for that matter, Paine says "I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense" (17). This humility, simplicity, and logic made Paine all-the-more credible and receivable by his audience. In writing *Common Sense*, Paine knew the value of unity, and that without it America would suffer greatly at the hands of its oppressors. This is why he stresses unity amongst the colonists, seeing it as a crucial strength that will prove powerful in the grand scheme of things. "It is not in numbers but in unity, that our great strength lies," says Paine (31). Encouragement and reassurance are also important factors in these sections as Paine rallies the people around the cause for independence.

In his presentation of the current ability of the American people, Paine makes the case for a defensive war, saying that “We need to go abroad for nothing” (32); America has the manpower, trade skills, and raw materials to fight a large-scale revolutionary war, he remarks. The ramifications of such a war would involve that which Paine holds so dear – an end to tyranny, unity among the commoners, and a fully independent nation-state. Paine delivers what is perhaps the final blow to monarchy when he asks, “But where is the king of America?”, and answers, “I’ll tell you friend, he reigns above...in America, the Law is King” (28).

Now that the core ideological aims of *Common Sense* have been established and explored, it is time to delve into the persuasive element of this monumental pamphlet: Paine’s skilled, seemingly unparalleled use of rhetoric. How was Paine able to envelop the attention of colonial readers, provoke their minds toward these revolutionary ideas, and either reinforce or change their attitudes and behavior in support of such concepts? The solution to this puzzle lies not in Paine’s political theory or logical arguments, but rather in his ability to make those impassioned sentiments come to life in front of the readers’ eyes, as if they had immediately become engulfed in this struggle for independence. Author Robert Ferguson drives this point home when he acknowledges the power of Paine’s rhetoric, saying he “...takes what is plausible to an immediate audience and turns it into something unforgettable” (476). With this rhetorical skill, Paine was able to bridge the gap between feeling and action. A collective responsibility for the pursuit of independence welled up in the hearts of colonists who, by Paine’s aid, were beginning to sense the gravity of this fateful era. Paine stressed this collective responsibility often, using such phrases as “if every man must be a soldier” (Paine, 24), and “The custom of all courts is against us, and will be so, until, by an independence, we take rank with other nations” (39). The way in which he accomplished this collective mentality and willingness of his audience

falls largely upon his aptitude for rhetorical devices; methods such as religious references, emotional appeals - among them fear and guilt -, persuasive language, phraseology, and literary devices.

Common Sense is both a cognitive and emotional appeal. It is a call to both the head and the heart; with every intelligent, political argument, Paine fortifies his stance with intense language, emotional tone, or fiery narrative. Paine's work finds a sound balance between potency of thought and potency of feeling. One main rhetorical theme prevalent throughout *Common Sense* is the author's use of religious sentiments and references to provide evidence for his claims. Paine's understanding of his audience's devout, and diverse, religious beliefs, coupled with his extensive knowledge of the Bible, allowed him to reach out and deeply influence the minds and souls of many a God-fearing colonist. With no reference to any particular denomination, Paine's "scrupulously abstract supreme being" (Ferguson, 487) was still able to portray divine wrath as well as divine mercy. "That the almighty hath here entered his protest against monarchical government is true, or the scripture false," states Paine, who goes on to say, "...that it is the will of the almighty that there should be diversity of religious opinions among us" (Paine, 12, 37). Another common rhetorical strategy throughout *Common Sense* is Paine's utilization of fear and guilt appeals. These are employed to tug at the emotional strings of the reader's conscience and helped the author connect with his audience's character, whether that was a deep-seated loyalist, a battle-wounded patriot, or a local dockhand who happened to come across a copy of the pamphlet. As America teetered on the edge of chaos, it seemed that the threat of danger, properly conveyed and then overcome, would carry the colonists toward realms of higher accomplishment (Ferguson, 468). In one of his many fear appeals, Paine says, "I am clearly, positively, and conscientiously persuaded that it is the true interest of the continent to be

so (independent); that everything short of that is...leaving the sword to our children” (23).

Paine’s use of guilt appeals are even more abundant throughout *Common Sense*, and are effective in that they arouse an uncomfortable, remorseful feeling within the reader, working to prompt him or her into an attitude of deep responsibility and subsequently the behavior to act on this sentiment. In one of his more intense guilt appeals within *Common Sense* Paine states,

“Hath your house been burnt? Hath your property been destroyed before your face? Are your wife and children destitute of a bed to lie on, or bread to live on? Have you lost a parent or a child by their hands, and yourself the ruined and wretched survivor? If you have not, then you are not a judge of those who have. But if you have, and can still shake hands with the murderers, then you are unworthy the title of husband, father, friend, or lover...you have the heart of a coward and the spirit of a sycophant” (22).

As harsh as this passage may sound, it epitomizes the effect of a successful guilt appeal; by comparing the reader’s amount of suffering to those who have already been bloodied by Britain’s sword, his words enter the audience’s conscience, forcing them to feel the burden of guilt and stirring them to re-examine their motives and patriotism.

Paine’s rhetoric in *Common Sense* also extends beyond his evident use of religious sentiments and emotional appeals and into the more subtle, yet highly influential, realm of language, phraseology, and literary devices. Throughout *Common Sense*, Paine relies on his skill as a storyteller to relate more personally with the audience, utilizing emotionally-laden words, stark imagery, strong phrasing, and an urgent tone to present his persuasive arguments. This “common language, easy alliteration, balanced phraseology, and verbal antithesis” allowed Paine to develop a “closer association with the common people” (Ferguson, 488). Paine’s use of

metaphorical language is made very apparent throughout his pinnacle work, and serves to provide a new meaning to his logical arguments and create a different, more attentive reality for his audience through eloquent analogies and symbolism. He often uses familial terms in these metaphors, comparing Britain to the “parent country”, and Americans to the “children” of this New World. In one of these metaphors Paine says of Britain, “Even brutes do not devour their young; nor savages make war upon their families...” (Paine, 19). In another instance of metaphorical language, Paine uses the analogy of revolution and a doorway when he states, “...though we have been wise enough to shut and lock a door against absolute monarchy, we at the same time have been foolish enough to put the crown in possession of the key” (8).

Symbolism is another prevalent literary device within *Common Sense*. For example, the symbol of a tree is utilized often to represent liberty (Jordan, 305). In his description of natural government Paine says, “Some convenient tree will afford them a State-House, under the branches of which, the whole colony may assemble to deliberate on public matters” (Paine, 5).

Literary devices such as paradox, oxymoron, and alliteration are also operated by Paine quite frequently in *Common Sense*. One of his more famous alliterative phrases is, “Reconciliation and ruin are nearly related” (Paine, 25). Overall, Paine’s courageous arguments in favor of independence were able to permeate the minds of his audience through the art of persuasive language, or rhetoric.

To this day, Paine’s influential words in *Common Sense* reverberate throughout this great nation; America perhaps would not be so united if it weren’t for this remarkable piece of revolutionary rhetoric published by the anonymous Paine in early 1776. With war at America’s doorstep, Paine filled the need of his colonial audience – “a need of which they were not fully aware – to deny their king as their sovereign father” (Jordan, 301). His pamphlet not only

awakened Americans to the reality of unprecedented independence, but also encouraged them to become more fraternal amongst themselves in this pivotal point in this nation's history. George Washington is quoted as saying, "*Common Sense* is working a powerful change there in the minds of many men" (Jordan, 295). Paine's ability to induce this powerful change in the attitudes and behavior of his audience and ultimately inspire separation from the British crown truly makes him one of the greatest persuaders of all time. In fact, Paine is the only figure of revolutionary leadership to achieve such status solely through authorship. Tom Paine's legacy lives on, as "The rhetorical patterns initiated in *Common Sense* have become intrinsic to American political speech, and they are now permanently embedded in the expressions of identity on which this culture depends" (Ferguson, 467). Paine's urgent call for a Declaration of Independence became a reality on July 4, 1776, when the founding fathers of the American colonies issued outright separation from British tyranny by declaring a Revolutionary War which allowed for Paine's sentiments to be fulfilled; there was no looking back from that point forth. Thomas Paine, a founding father in his own right, had successfully influenced the formation of the United States of America through one piece of writing that meant all things to all people.

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